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ABSTRACT

The third of seven booklets on adults with learning disabilities, this manual addresses the evaluation and remediation of oral language difficulties. An assessment section focuses on behaviors and disorders which adult education teachers should look for as well as informal diagnostic tasks in auditory discrimination, grammar, vocabulary, social use of language, and oral language recall. The remediation section parallels the assessment information section, presenting suggestions for remediating problems in auditory discrimination, grammar, vocabulary and underlying meaning, word finding, semantics, social language skills, and oral language recall. It is pointed out that few commercial materials exist for oral language instruction of the learning disabled; however, five references are listed and these are followed by a longer bibliography which includes descriptions of materials and techniques and which offer useful ideas that may be adopted according to the needs of each student. (CL)

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Academic Assessment and Remediation of Adults with Learning Disabilities:

A Resource Series for Adult Basic Education Teachers

ASSESSMENT AND REMEDIATION OF ORAL LANGUAGE

Five County Adult Education Program
(Barrow, Clarke, Jackson, Oconee, and Oglethorpe Counties)
Clarke County Board of Education
Athens, Georgia 30601

1984

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PREFACE

All adults who have not completed high school are potential clients for our Adult General Education Program and are aggressively recruited. Most of them with motivation proceed normally through our instructional program until they reach their goal. While following the progress of our students, we observed that some of them made slower progress and gained lower than expected achievement levels. These students did not reach their goal or our goal for them, although many had good motivation, seemed alert and bright, and occasionally made excellent progress in one or more skills. An awareness grew that a significant number of the students might be learning disabled.

Assistance was at hand from the University of Georgia, Department of Special Education, in the persons of Dr. Cheri Hoy and Dr. Noel Gregg, who met with the staff of the project for planning, worked with our adult education teachers in workshops, as well as wrote our project publications. Our appreciation is also expressed to the teachers of the five-county program for their participation, to Mrs. Betty Westbrook, Athens, for her extra-hours typing of the manuscripts, to Ms. Shelby Johnson, Snellville, for editorial assistance, and to Dr. Edward T. Brown, Stone Mountain, for facilitating the development and production processes.

Dr. Janie Rodgers
Project Director

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ASSESSING ORAL LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES

Oral language deficits cause many learning disabled adults serious problems with both academic and vocational goals. The inability to understand (receptive) and/or utilize (expressive) language can lead to underachievement in various areas of oral language (i.e., syntax, auditory discrimination, auditory memory, semantics, pragmatics). Deficits in areas of receptive and/or expressive language are the result of specific cognitive processing disabilities. Receptive (understanding) and expressive (speaking) learning disabilities often lead to underachievement in reading, written language, and mathematics. Specific remediation in the area of oral language is often a prerequisite to efficient instruction in other academic areas. However, oral language disabilities impact the hardest on the learning disabled adults' social and vocational functioning.

Behaviors To Look For

How do you know if there is an oral language problem? Here are some behaviors to look for:

1. Difficulty labeling. Appears to know the concept, but cannot recall the specific word to express it.
2. Difficulty following multi-step directions.
3. Difficulty relating information in sequence.
4. Difficulty restating what someone just said.
5. Difficulty recalling the steps of a task just completed.
6. Difficulty recalling information learned a week ago.
7. Difficulty exchanging meaningful conversation.
8. Difficulty defining words that can be correctly used in conversation.

9. Difficulty understanding basic oral directions.
10. Difficulty understanding humor.

Disorders To Look For

The oral language disorders of many learning disabled adults are subtle and often not obvious to someone not trained in the area of language. Deficits in oral language, however, interfere not only with oral communication, but also with ability in reading, written language, mathematics, and social skills.

As a teacher, you need to assess the following areas of language to determine if an oral language deficit is the source of the learning disabled adult's underachievement.

1. Auditory discrimination: the ability to perceive differences between individual sounds, words (multisyllabic and one syllable words) and phrases
2. Grammar and/or form or oral expression
3. Vocabulary level (concrete - abstract)
4. Underlying meaning, ideas, concepts, or content
5. Appropriateness of the use of language to social situations
6. Short- and long-term recall of information which has been heard
7. Listening comprehension

Tasks For Identifying Area Of Disabilities

There are innumerable tasks that can be given informally to students, and many observations that can be made during normal but guided conversations which will help to identify specific areas of difficulty. The following tasks are especially adaptable by the adult education teacher for use in the academic situation.

Auditory Discrimination

Task 1: Given pairs of similar sounding words or identical words, the student decides whether the words were the same or different.

pin / pan

hat / had

Task 2: Given two similar sounding or identical multisyllabic words, the student decides whether the words sounded the same or different.

conservation / conversation

destruction / distribution

Task 3: During oral conversation (informal), observe if the student misunderstands single words or phrases which interfere with comprehension of the conversation.

Grammar and/or Form

Task 1: Given a single word, the student orally formulates a complete sentence.

running - A deer was running along the edge of the woods.

Task 2: Given a sentence completion task, the student orally inserts appropriate missing words in the correct word order.

The man is taking a shower although _____ _____ _____.

The man is taking a shower because _____ _____ _____.

The man takes a shower if _____ _____ _____ _____.

Task 3: During informal oral language activity, observe if the student has difficulty with the order of words in a sentence.

Vocabulary and Underlying Meaning

Task 1: Given words of various categories (i.e., nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.), the student orally defines the words. The adult education teacher notes whether there were particular categories of words that the student had difficulty defining.

Task 2: Word Finding Problems: If the adult education teacher feels the student understands the meaning of the word but cannot recall the label, the student may be demonstrating a word finding problem. The teacher should evaluate whether the student is aided in recall by using any of the following cues:

a. initial sound

b. rhyming

c. picture

d. association

Task 3: Double Function Words: Given a word that has multiple meanings, the student can supply more than one meaning for the word.

blew / blue

Task 4: Given pairs of synonymous and nonsynonymous sentences, the student can identify whether the sentences have the same meaning.

The picture that is finished was painted by that artist.

That artist painted the picture that is finished.

Task 5: Given idioms, proverbs, and/or common expressions, the student can explain their meaning.

"Burning the candle at both ends."

Task 6: Given a verbal absurdity sentence, the student can identify what is illogical about the statement.

"My mother gave my sister a ring five hundred dollars."

Task 7: Given an oral sentence, the student can answer a question about the sentence.

Tom was hit by Bill.

Who was hurt?

The man fed the dog after he read the newspaper.

What did the man do first?

Task 8: After listening to an orally presented short passage, the student can recall specific facts from the passage.

Observation Of The Social Use Of Language

Rather than using specific tasks to assess the appropriateness of the student's language, the adult education teacher can observe peer interactions and class discussions to evaluate the appropriateness of the use of language various social situations. Does the student:

1. greet others appropriately?
2. converse without giving irrelevant and/or inappropriate information to the listener?
3. show sensitivity to the listener's need for background information?
4. use polite forms in requesting?
5. use appropriate turn-taking skills in conversing?
6. initiate conversation appropriately?
7. hold own place in a conversation?
8. request information while keeping in mind the needs of the audience?

9. respond appropriately to requests for intentions?

10. make complaints appropriately?

Tasks To Access Oral Language Recall

The short and long term recall capability can be determined from the following tasks:

Task 1: Given increasingly longer series of unrelated words, the student can recall the words. (The average adult is able to remember approximately seven unrelated words.)

Task 2: Given increasingly longer individual sentences, the student can recall the exact sentence given.

Task 3: Given a series of several directions for an assignment, the student can recall all of the steps in order.

REMEDIATING ORAL LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES

The teacher who suspects that a student has a specific oral language deficit must be able to take the information gained during formal and informal assessment and translate it into instructional practices. Appropriate materials and teaching strategies must be found to match the specific strengths and weaknesses. A mismatch between the student's abilities and the instructional approach will result in tremendous frustration for both the teacher and the student. Since many of the adults who come to adult education classes have experienced failure and frustration in the past, it is extremely important that all of the available information be used to make the current experience a successful one.

HOW TO USE THIS SECTION

This section is designed to help you use assessment information to plan instruction which will match the student's strengths and weaknesses. The organization of this section parallels the organization of the first section. If you feel that the student has problems with oral language because of specific auditory discrimination deficits, then look under the heading of "Auditory Discrimination" to find teaching strategies. A word of caution: the suggestions in this section are only meant to help you get started. Comprehensive instructional plans are not outlined here. For help in this area, refer to the list of references which appears at the end of this booklet.

Auditory Discrimination

Auditory discrimination deficits make it difficult for the adult to distinguish differences between similar sounds whether they are environmental or in words. This difficulty in hearing the differences between sounds frequently affects meaning. A learning disabled adult might think the teacher said "verbals" rather than "variables" and thus make an inappropriate response. Auditory discrimination problems often affect listening comprehension, reading, and spelling. Remediation of such a problem should not be carried out in isolation but rather integrated into the spelling and reading lessons. The most important goal of remediation should be to heighten the adult's awareness to the problem in order that he or she can begin to self-monitor the problem. Also, the adult must begin to learn strategies that will help him or her to circumvent the problem. The following activities are suggested to help heighten the adult's awareness that an auditory discrimination problem exists.

1. Provide opportunities for the student to discover what types of tasks help discriminate between similar sounding words (i.e., pictures, one-syllable words, multisyllabic words, words in context).
2. Provide opportunities for students to listen to their own oral language on tape to see whether they can identify errors in their own speech.
3. Provide opportunities for the student to listen to a tape presenting subtle word substitutions in order to detect whether the substitutions changed the meaning of the text.
4. Provide individual sentences with word substitutions ("academic" for "epidemic") and have the student detect the error.

Grammar And/Or Form

Language learning disabled adults sometimes have difficulty understanding and/or applying the grammatical rules they appear to have implicitly generalized. Those adults with expressive syntax problems know the rules but cannot seem to formulate their sentences. At times these adults have difficulty constructing utterances at the level of phrases and clauses, producing scrambled sentences. Some adults can produce syntactically correct utterances in spontaneous conversations, but cannot perform on structured task such as: sentence repetition, sentence building, sentence completion, and/or sentence transformation.

You may wish to consider the following questions prior to beginning remediation in oral syntax:

1. How do the problems with oral syntax affect other areas of language and how do the other areas of language affect oral syntax?
2. What specific cognitive processing problems seem to be interfering (i.e., memory, perception, attention)?
3. What academic or social areas are affected?
4. What strategies appear to be effective in helping the adult circumvent the problems with oral syntax?

Suggestions for reinstruction and remediation activities may evolve from the investigation of the above questions. Those that are pertinent to the learning goals and environment of the student should be especially pursued. The following activities are suggested as formats for them.

1. Provide the student with opportunities to identify noun plurals and noun-verb agreement. The following sequence of activities should be followed:

a. Identify the noun plural and/or noun-verb agreement being worked on.

b. Present multiple choice statements. (Tim takes one (book/books) to school.)

c. Present cloze activities (fill in the blank).

d. Change a sentence (guided composition) from singular to plural.

2. Provide the student with the same sequence of activities in identifying specific noun derivations, prefix/suffixes, verb tenses, and auxiliary verbs.

3. Have the student unscramble sentences. First, require the student to judge which sentence is correct.

He in the garage worked on the car.

He worked on the car in the garage.

Then provide other scrambled sentences and ask the student to place the words in their correct order.

4. Provide the student with an opportunity to work on the correct use of conjunctions (and, but, or until, etc.). First, orally present a sentence with a conjunction and have the student identify the two coordinated sentences.

John is tall and Mary is short.

John is tall.

Mary is short.

Then orally present the two coordinated sentences and delete the conjunction. Let the student identify a correct conjunction.

John drives a van ____ rides a cycle.

Continue this type of activity with subordinate as well as coordinate clauses.

5. Orally present paragraphs with conjunction and/or subordinate omissions, and ask the student to fill in the missing word.

6. Adults often benefit from the presentation of syntactic structures in print. Presenting the above activities in print can often lead to improvement with oral language skills. Sentence-combining activities can be useful in developing the oral language skills of adults with syntax problems (see Written Language Booklet).

Vocabulary And Underlying Meaning

The language learning disabled adult may be experiencing difficulty understanding the meaning of words (semantics). Word finding problems also often give the learning disabled adult difficulty. Remediation in this area requires that the teacher has done some specific diagnostic assessment in order to determine the specific category of words or structures needing intervention. Here are some activities useful in addressing these two areas of language.

Word finding problems

A student who understands the meaning of a word but cannot recall the label may be demonstrating a word finding problem. As with auditory discrimination problems, word finding problems should be worked on in a meaningful context, not in isolation. The purpose of remediation should be to help the student find the cues that will best help in recalling a word (i.e., initial sound, rhyming, picture, and/or association). Then the teacher should give the student practice using the strategies that help.

1. Give the student a picture and ask him or her to rapidly name objects, actions, and so on.

2. Provide the student with sentence completion exercises.

   Cars are _____.

   Children like _____.

   You can row _____.

3. Provide word association exercises.

   I like bread and _____.

4. Provide the student with activities that require the recall of certain types of relationships:

   antonyms

   synonyms

   superordinates

   spatially related words

   temporally related words

   verbs

   analogies

Word meaning (semantics) problems

Remediation on the understanding of words should always be done with items functional to the adult. The words should express experiences and concepts familiar and basic to the adult's world. The remediation should be directed toward the development and organization of new categorical structures. Therefore, the focus of the instruction should not be on isolated words, but rather on the interrelationships of words. Through diagnostic teaching the teacher must decide toward which category of words the remediation should be directed. The following list may help to determine where the breakdown in understanding originates:

Category:

nouns

verbs

adjectives

adverbs

prepositions

pronouns

Word relationships and figurative language:

verbal analogies

idioms

metaphors

proverbs

After you have determined the class of words the learning disabled adult needs to work on, the following sequence of activities should be followed:

1. Determine if the student understands the concept behind the word (i.e., spacial concept, time concept). If the adult does not understand the concept, provide a concrete example of the idea.
2. Design tasks to develop an understanding of the class of words through the following types of exercises:
    a. correct/incorrect
    b. multiple choice
    c. cloze (fill in the blank)
    d. questioning

        The new car was not big.

        What size was the car?

3. The student will need opportunities to utilize the word meanings in various contexts. This will allow the individual to learn what are optional and essential characteristics of the word.
4. The adult will need to learn both instances and noninstances of the word meaning.
5. Learning disabled adults often have difficulty understanding the double meanings behind the following types of language structures:
    a. sarcasm
    b. idiomatic expressions
    c. ambiguity
    d. indirect request
    e. multiple meanings

Therefore, activities must be developed to teach the double meanings of language. Try reading a story aloud to the adult and questioning him/her when sarcasm or multiple meaning is used. The context can be used to help the adult learn new meanings for words.

Language Skill Across Social Situations

Specific language deficits often cause the learning disabled adult to use inappropriate language for specific situations. Therefore, the teacher must work on helping the student use language that is proper and pragmatic to the purpose of each type of verbal interchange. Vocational success, social success, and academic progress are all dependent on this skill. Each of the following activities can be adjusted for use in all of the situations, in the classroom, in the corridor, and at work.

1. Set up situations where the student must convey an intended message. For example, have the student direct you in completing some activity.

   Here's a box. You are the teacher. Tell me what to do with the box.

2. Give suggestions on how to stay on the topic and not to wander from the main idea of the conversation.
3. Provide activities to learn the use of words to convey nuances of meaning and shades of interpersonal contact.

   Would you go?

   Could you go?

   You might want to go.

4. Cut pictures from magazines and point out how "body language" is an important aspect of understanding what people mean.
5. Set up situations in which the student can enhance information given to another person who has a different perspective of time, space, or direction.
6. Role play with the adult different situations where the type of language structures might change depending on the audience (i.e., minister, boss, friend).

Oral Language Recall

Learning disabled adults often have difficulty recalling information which they have heard. Such difficulties many times prevent them from progressing when a lecture/discussion format is used during instruction. Adults with this type of problem will have to learn strategies to help them store and retrieve information effectively. Specific suggestions follow:

1. During instruction try to pair lecture/discussion material with some type of visual display (i.e., pictures, graphs, films, charts).
2. Encourage the student to take an active part in all class discussions and activities. Active involvement will help increase the meaningfulness of the material, and, therefore, assist later recall.
3. Encourage the student to relate new information to previously learned material.
4. When you introduce new concepts, give the student the opportunity to use those concepts in a variety of situations. This will help build associations which can be useful in later recall.
5. Heighten the students' awareness of memory difficulties and help them develop strategies to circumvent them (i.e., making notes to aid recall, associating information with other information, creating a visual image of the information).
6. Be aware that some mnemonic aids (i.e., catchy sayings, acronyms) are not helpful to the adult with memory problems because of difficulty remembering the aids themselves.

MATERIALS

There are almost no commercial materials available for oral language instruction of the learning disabled. Some of those listed for written language and reading instruction can be adapted but for the most part, teachers will need to adapt and innovate using the interests and motivations of each student. It should be noted, however, that many of the references which follow include descriptions of materials and techniques used in instructional or diagnostic situations. Some of these references would be a valuable source of ideas for teachers.

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